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Orient and Occident

The abstract distinction between Orient and Occident has a bearing on the whole of our concrete understanding of God, the World and Man. This traditional trinity is based, to an extent scarcely realized today, on the concept of the world originating in the Biblical story of the Creation, according to which the world was created by God in a single act and for a limited space of time, man alone being created in God's own image. The distinction between East and West takes on quite a different meaning if the Deity is the "Course (Tao) of the Heavens (T'ien)", in contrast with the Earth – Heaven and Earth being the source of all life – and Earth, the dwelling-place of mortals. These are the principles of ancient Chinese thought which, like Greek philosophy, measures the just and proper constitution of the world by the inviolable order of heaven. Since, however, man's understanding of himself depends essentially on his experience of the world and of things divine and since, with the world and God, he forms a coordinated unit, our knowledge of each depending upon what we know of the other members, the standard concepts of God, the World and Man cannot be simply and separately translated into a mode of thinking which differs in all its terms from that to which we are accustomed. Much as the Greek *to theion, kosmos* and *anthropos* do not mean the same as the *Deus, mundus,* or *homo* of a Christian philosopher, it is still less feasible to interpret the Chinese sign *Ti* (God of Heaven) or the Japanese *Kami* (= the Higher Ones, analogous to the Latin *superi),* which Christian missionaries translate by "God", as identical in meaning with the personal Creator – God of the Old and New Testaments. In spite of this fundamental difference between the basic principles of East and West, we can speak of a peculiarly Western (Greek, Roman and Christian) concept of God, the World and Man only if we draw sharp lines of discrimination and thereby show the relation between them and concepts of another kind, with which we are unfamiliar. In the same way, the Greeks became aware that they were Greeks when they realized the

differences and also the relationship between themselves and the "barbarians". To the Occident, Orientals have always been "alien", i.e. people different from Westerners, although the dividing line at present runs between Russia and America. If a man has never known a stranger, he cannot know himself either. Contact between the two results in comparisons and distinctions being formulated which are only possible between elements differing from each other. A comparison that reveals the differences between two elements does not, however, necessarily eliminate them: it leads rather to a mutual interrogation which eventually clarifies the limits of each, i.e. to self-criticism. Lack of self-criticism is due to the subject's inability to see himself as a stranger, to regard himself objectively. My opportunity to recognize my own limits came through emigration and five years of teaching at a Japanese university.

The entire history of Europe was originally founded on, and is stamped with, the knowledge of the essential difference between East and West. It began when the Greek city-states, communities of free citizens, came into conflict with the despotism of the Persian Empire. In "The Persians" of Aeschylus, when the Queen of the Persians, learning of the defeat of her naval forces, asks who rules over the Greeks, she is taken aback by the reply: "They are the servants of no man, and no man's subjects". Ever since this claim to freedom was made by men of equal birth, who were originally distinguished from those who were born slaves, the freedom of equals has been regarded as the basic principle of the European spirit. That idea, drained of content, has hardened in its transition from Hegel's historical and philosophical scheme of "Progress in the Consciousness of Freedom" to Tocqueville's doubts about the possibility of uniting liberty and equality, and to the present propaganda for the egalitarian freedom of free nations. According to Herodotus, the attitude of the Greek mind towards the world was no less strange to the Persians than was the political status of the people. Croesus, the Persian king, was astonished that the Greek, Solon, should travel through the Near East as a philosopher, i.e. merely "to observe" it, without other intention. The distinguishing characteristic of philosophy as an *episteme theoretike* remained valid from classical times down to Hegel. It still determines the difference between the West's pursuit of knowledge and the wisdom of the East, between exploration and meditation, one of the main differences being revealed in physical attitudes: in the West, the restless movement of those out to explore and

experience; in the East, the passive immobility of those who wish to concentrate. The victory of the Greeks over the Persians has permanent significance as the beginning of European history and historiography. It also made it possible for the Greek mind to continue to exist in the West after Christianity took over. Our way of thinking is still unoriental.

The conflict between the Occident and the Orient, of great moment in the history of the world, came to an end when Alexander the Great spread Hellenism beyond the Near and the Middle East. The hellenization of the Orient and the consequent absorption of the Orient by the Greeks was, according to Nietzsche, the crucial event in history, the greatest so far, and it lies at the root of our present problem. The conclusion he drew from this was that there was need of a series of "anti-Alexanders", who would be sufficiently powerful "to draw together and to bind" (after the fashion of Napoleon) and "to simplify" the world, in order to prevent the threadbare fabric of Europe from wearing out completely. "The task is not to untie the Gordian knot of Greek culture, as Alexander did, causing its ends to flutter in all directions, but to reassemble and re-tie those loose ends." Nietzsche also held his rejection of a now superfluous Christianity, which for him was part of the Oriental tradition, to be in line with the process of binding and simplifying. A second great wave of resistance to the East, and to the advance of Islam in particular, occurred when Constantinople fell in 1453, two thousand years after the Greeks had defeated the Persians. The new campaign against the East was conducted under the banner of Christianity, which had scarcely penetrated beyond the world of the Roman Empire. In the five hundred years after Marco Polo's journeys of discovery, traders set up isolated settlements in the Far East, the British pursued their colonial policy in India, and the European powers established enclaves in China. Finally, in 1868, the American navy forced Japan to open her doors, which had been closed to the West except for a Dutch trading station in Nagasaki. As early as the 17th century French missionaries had been important mediators between the West and China. Their reports and the deep impression made on them by Chinese morality and the ethics of Confucius raised considerable problems for the Jesuit mission: ought they to adapt themselves to the state religion of China as a means of spreading Christianity? The Church said "No", but Voltaire supported his Jesuit friends. For him, the news from China was an opportunity to cast doubts on the Christian image of Europe.

His "Essai sur les Moeurs et l'Esprit des Nations", published in 1756, was an attack against Bossuet's "Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle" (1681), a theologian's view of world history in line with the writings of Augustine. Voltaire, on the other hand, saw the beginnings of history, not in the Biblical version of the Creation and the Fall, but in China, a view adopted later by Hegel. This new perpective, expressed first in Voltaire's tragedy, "L'Orphelin de la Chine", caused Europe, for the first time in modern history, to look at herself and her Christianity with the eyes of the East. She began to criticize herself objectively and to see differences. The study of comparative religion and civilization is a consequence of thus establishing the relations between differing principles. The *orbis terrarum* of Antiquity and Christendom was subjected to a critical comparison which vitiated the European tradition. Voltaire's first statement on China was based on his intention to discredit the Biblical story of the Creation with the argument that Chinese civilization was not only much older and more venerable, but was more enlightened and on a higher plane than that reflected in the history of the Jews, up till then the core of the Christian interpretation of history. Summarizing his views on the Old Testament, Voltaire writes: "With the Jews almost all purely human action is repulsive in the extreme; everything in their history that concerns God is far beyond our narrow comprehension". On the other hand he found the history of the Chinese to be free of absurd fables, miracles and prophecies. To Voltaire, Confucius, whose portrait hung in his bedroom – *Sancte Confuci ora pro nobis* – was a genuine sage and far superior to all the prophets.

A generation later, Christian principles were secularized in the French Revolution with its declaration of human rights made in the name of liberty and equality. Since then, the political power of the Christian churches throughout Europe has declined in proportion to the spread of ideas originating in the French Revolution in ever-widening circles throughout the globe, where they caused further revolutions in the East. It is no longer possible to equate Christendom with Europe, as Novalis did. In the modern Europe of emancipated citizens, salaried employees and workpeople, where industry and scientific engineering are the common springs of life, traditions are being eroded and a new world has taken shape. The struggle between "Ancient and Modern" has long been decided in favour of the latter. Judged by both her traditions – humanism and Christianity – Europe has lost her identity since the 19th

century. And, since the second world war, what remains of Europe has become dependent on the United States of America, originally a European colony; since assuming supremacy in Europe, the United States has become representative of the general concept of the "West", though it can itself scarcely be reckoned as a part of the Occident. The more "American" the United States becomes, the less "European" it will be. And the more successfully Europe keeps up with the pace of general progress, the more "American" it will become. The americanization of Europe, as of Japan, was not, however, imposed on these countries after their defeat: it was a logical consequence of the universal rationalization of all public life as a result of technology. No nation desirous of becoming or remaining competitive can turn the clock back.

What, then, do we mean by "Western", since the West is nourished by traditions so divergent as those of Greek and Roman paganism, Latin Christianity and modern scientific technology? The absorption by the Church and theologians of a fraction of the Greek and Roman traditions has never achieved a union accepted by all. It has invariably resulted in a state of tension between irreconcilables, leading to a fresh decision, – in the case of Kierkegaard, for, and in the case of Nietzsche, against – Christianity. Humanism and Christianity have, it is true, both contributed to the rich variety of European culture but, in their original meaning and content, they now lead a tenuous existence only in the minds of a few cultured humanists and believing Christians. And the unity and continuity of tradition in the East is just as precarious as its counterpart in Europe, so that the age-old antithesis between East and West calls for a thorough revision.

Japan since the Meiji reforms, China since Sun-Yat-Sen, and India since Nehru donned the mantle of Ghandi, have also lost their identity. Europe is no longer Ancient Europe, and the East is no longer the Ancient East; both have been radically altered by the same invasion of technology and industry. It thereforce becomes increasingly difficult to make a clear demarcation between West and East in a few, simple terms. Moreover, when we remember that Marx was a student of Hegel and Feuerbach, and that Marxism as exported was originally a product of Western self-criticism, we arrive at the paradox that the sun of Europe is rising in the East now that it is setting at home, in consequence of Europe's situation between Russia and America. Even the sceptical reflexions of H. von Hofmannsthal, occasioned by the downfall of the

Habsburg monarchy, are out of date now that not only Vienna, but also Prague and Warsaw have been deprived of their roles as centres of European culture. Hegel, 150 years ago, had no doubt whatever but that the entire history of the world rotated about the axis of Christianity and that the ancient empires of the East were moving westwards to their consummation in 19th century Europe where, thanks to the French Revolution, man had found his "head", i.e. his reason, for the first time in history. Today it is obvious that the current of events is flowing the opposite way. On the basis of their acquisition of European skills and echoing the rights asserted during the French Revolution, the peoples of the Near and Far East and, recently, of Africa, are now developing an awareness of progress that brings them up against the European colonial powers and America.

The fact that the residuum of Europe no longer bears the stamp of the Christian faith, that Red China is no longer regulated by Confucianism, or westernized Japan by Buddhism does not, however, imply that both the Occident and the Orient have abandoned their ancient traditions. For all the radical changes that have taken place, the cultural legacy acquired and maintained over thousands of years cannot lose its efficacy entirely. Technical civilization and, with it, modes of thought conditioned by the demands of science, are admittedly the same everywhere; but there are still distinct cultural traditions even though the daily life of the masses, from the cradle to the grave, is no longer regulated by Christian churches or Buddhist temples. If today we can fly in 30 hours from Europe to Japan via the North Pole, the international span of this triumph of technology does not eliminate the distinction between eastern and western ways of life and thought. It is true that the airport of Haneda, where the European arrives, is international; but his short journey through Yokohama will suffice to show him a quite different world of unfamiliar customs and inscrutable people. The unfamiliar strikes his senses vividly: it is conveyed by the scenery, the architecture of the houses, by domestic and public manners and, above all, by the language, art and music. Understanding the spoken word does not appear to depend merely on hearing, but on knowing the corresponding sign in Japanese or Chinese writing. This explains why a Japanese in conversation, instead of raising his voice to elucidate a word that is ambiguous, either in meaning or by reason of imperfect articulation, can frequently be seen outlining the corresponding ideogram

with his finger, in the air, or by drawing it on the surface of a table. This accords with the fact that calligraphy is not merely the written reproduction of spoken words – it is a completely independent and self-contained art, on the same level as the arts of drawing and painting. Lacking the necessary equipment, we are quite incapable of formulating such striking differences in intellectual terms, and even the urge to do so is specifically western, even Hegelian, in origin. Nor is it possible to speak of *the* East or *the* West: the differences between India, China and Japan are far greater than those, say, between Spain, France and England, and between Europe as a whole, and America.

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